Marijuana Law and Policy
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For my entire family, all of whom have shared wisdom in various ways about various aspects of law, policy and practice in this arena.

—Douglas A. Berman

For my father, Leonard Kreit, whose interest in the subject matter may not have always been, strictly speaking, legal.

—Alex Kreit
Contents

Table of Cases xix
Acknowledgments xxiii
Introduction xxv

Chapter 1 • What Is Marijuana, How Is It Used, and What Is It Similar To? 3
   A. What Is Marijuana? 3
      
      Marihuana, A Signal of Misunderstanding, U.S. National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse (1972) 3
      Colorado Constitution, Article XVIII, Section 16 14
      Notes 15
      Arizona v. Jones, 246 Ariz. 452 (May 28, 2019) 18
      Notes 21
      Policy Problem 1-1 22
      Policy Problem 1-2 22

   B. How Is Marijuana Used? 23
      
      The Real Difference Between Smoking and Eating Marijuana, Olga Khazan, THE ATLANTIC (July 24, 2019) 26
      I Have a Cannabis Problem. I Still Think It Should Be Legalized. Mike Riggs, REASON (Aug. 22, 2018) 28
      Marijuana for Moms, Lindsey Hunter Lopez, THE ATLANTIC (Mar. 2, 2018) 31
      The Ethics of Wine Drinking and Tobacco Smoking, Leo Tolstoy (1891) 34

   C. What Is Marijuana Similar To? 37
      
      Drug Abuse in America: Problem in Perspective, National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse (1973) 37
### CONTENTS


1. Alcohol 46
   - *Rethinking Marijuana*, Campaign Literature for Nevada 2016 Campaign “Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol” 47
   - Notes 50

2. Tobacco 51
   - *Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products*, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Drug Facts (June 2018) 51
   - *Big Tobacco 2.0—Big Marijuana*, Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM) website (2019) 53
   - Notes 54

3. Other Drugs (Illegal and Legal) 55
   - 21 U.S. Code § 812 55
   - Notes 59

4. Transfat, Sugar, and Other Foods 60
   - Notes 61

5. Gambling 62
   - Notes 64

6. Prostitution 65
   - Notes 67

7. Guns 68
   - Notes 70

---

**Chapter 2 • Perspectives on Marijuana Prohibition and Alternatives** 73

A. Are Marijuana Crimes “Victimless”? 74
   - *State v. Hoseman*, 799 N.W.2d 479 (Wis. Ct. App. 2011) 74
   - Notes 79
## CONTENTS

On Liberty, John Stuart Mill (1859) 79
Notes 83

Notes 93


B. Do Privacy Rights Protect Marijuana Users? 102
Notes 112

C. Marijuana Prohibition and Alternatives: Weighing the Costs and Benefits 112

*Setting Goals for Drug Policy: Harm Reduction or Use Reduction?*, Jonathan P. Caulkins & Peter Reuter, 92 Addiction 1143 (1997) 113


### Chapter 3 • History of Federal and State Prohibitions of Marijuana 137

A. Early History of Drug Prohibitions 137


Notes 151

B. Modern Federal Marijuana Prohibition 152


Notes 159

*United States v. Kiffer*, 477 F.2d 349 (2d Cir. 1973) 160

Notes 165


Notes 172

*Gonzales v. Raich*, 545 U.S. 1 (2005) 173
Chapter 4 • Marijuana Criminalization 195

A. The Scope of Marijuana Criminalization 195


B. Race and Marijuana Prohibition 203

*The War on Marijuana in Black and White*, American Civil Liberties Union (2013) 204

C. Marijuana Crimes 212

1. Marijuana Possession 212
   a. Defining Possession 213
      *State v. Hogue*, 486 P.2d 403 (Haw. 1971) 213
      *State v. Fries*, 185 P.3d 453 (Or. 2008) 220
   b. Constructive Possession 225
      *Martin v. State*, 804 So. 2d 967 (Miss. 2001) 231
      *State v. Thomas*, 847 N.W.2d 438 (Iowa 2014) 234
      Notes 247

2. Distribution and Possession with the Intent to Distribute 248
   *United States v. Bobadilla-Pagán*, 747 F.3d 26 (1st Cir. 2014) 250
   Notes 261

3. Manufacture 263
   a. What Constitutes Manufacture? 263
      *State v. Childers*, 255 S.E.2d 654 (N.C. Ct. App. 1979) 263
b. Counting Marijuana Plants 265

4. Accomplice Liability and Conspiracy 269
  *United States v. Anaya*, 727 F.3d 1043 (10th Cir. 2013) 275
  Notes 279

5. Knowledge in Marijuana Cases 280
  a. Knowledge of Drug Type and Quantity 281
     *United States v. Jefferson*, 791 F.3d 1013 (9th Cir. 2015) 281
  b. Willful Blindness 287
     *United States v. Heredia*, 483 F.3d 913 (9th Cir. 2007) 288
     Notes 298
  c. Knowledge in Synthetic Marijuana Cases 299

6. Proof of Identity of Marijuana 305
  *State v. McKee*, 744 N.E.2d 737 (Ohio 2001) 306
  Notes 309

7. Marijuana Paraphernalia 310
  Notes 316

8. Driving Under the Influence 316
  *Dobson v. McClennen*, 361 P.3d 374 (Ariz. 2015) 327
  Notes 331

D. Punishing Marijuana Offenders 332

1. Marijuana Sentencing 332
   a. An Introduction to Sentencing 332
   b. The Importance of Quantity in Marijuana Sentencing 342
      Notes 353
   c. Marijuana Sentencing and Cruel and Unusual Punishment 356
      Notes 367
   d. Marijuana Sentencing in the Era of Legalization 368

2. Civil Sanctions 373
   a. Collateral Consequences 373
      *Collateral Damage*: No Re-Entry for Drug Offenders, Nora V. Demleitner, 47 Vill. L. Rev. 1027 (2002) 373
b. Immigration


Notes 386

c. Asset Forfeiture

*Fines, Fees, and Forfeitures*, Beth A. Colgan,

4 Reforming Criminal Justice 205

(Erik Luna ed., 2017) 388

E. Investigating Marijuana Crimes

389

1. Undercover Policing


Notes 393

2. Informants

*Deregulating Guilt: The Information Culture of the Criminal System*, Alexandra Natapoff,


Notes 402

3. Racial Profiling and Pretextual Stops

*Marijuana Legalization and Pretextual Stops*, Alex Kreit,

50 U.C. Davis L. Rev. 741 (2016) 403

Chapter 5 • Medical Marijuana

409

A. History of Marijuana Use for Medical Purposes

*Marijuana As Medicine?: The Science Beyond the Controversy*, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Chapter 2 (2000) 410


Notes 421

*Iowa v. Bonjour*, 694 N.W.2d 511 (Iowa 2005) 423

Notes 429

B. Medical Marijuana Reform and Regulation

430

1. Initial Development of Regulatory Regimes

*Conant v. Walters*, 309 F.3d 629 (9th Cir. 2002) 431

Notes 439


Notes 447

2. Modern Regulatory Structures and Operations

Notes 454

Mapping Medical Marijuana: State Laws Regulating Patients, Product Safety, Supply Chains and Dispensaries, Sarah Kliger et al., 112 Addiction 2206 (2017) 455

Qualifying Conditions of Medical Cannabis License Holders in the United States, Kevin Boehnke, Saurav Gangopadhyay, Daniel Clauw & Rebecca Haffajee, 38 Health Affairs 295 (2019) 459

Notes 463

C. Legal Issues Arising for Medical Marijuana Participants 465

1. Labor and Employment Issues 466

Coats v. Dish Network, LLC, 350 P.3d 849 (Colo. 2015) 466


Notes 475

2. Residence and Housing Issues 477

Sherwood Associates LP v. Jackson, 200 A.3d 1259 (Me. 2019) 477

State v. Maestas, 417 P.3d 774 (Ariz. 2018) 480

Notes 483

3. Family Law Issues 484

Daggett v. Sternick, 109 A.3d 1137 (Me. 2015) 484

Notes 487

4. Criminal Justice Issues 488

Reed-Kaliher v. Hoggatt, 347 P.3d 136 (Ariz. 2015) 488

Notes 492

Chapter 6 • Marijuana Legalization 495

A. An Overview of State Marijuana Legalization Laws 495

Marijuana Legalization, Alex Kreit, Academy of Justice, 1 Reforming Criminal Justice (Erik Luna ed., 2017) 496

Lessons Learned From the Governor’s Task Force to Implement Amendment 64, Sam Kamin 91 Or. L. Rev. 1337 (2013) 502

Notes 508

B. Comparing Models for Marijuana Legalization and Regulation 510

1. The Dutch Marijuana Coffee Shops 511

Notes 518
2. Legalization in Uruguay 519

_Uruguay’s Cannabis Law: Pioneering a New Paradigm_,
John Hudak, Geoff Ramsey & John Walsh,
The Brookings Institution (2018) 519

Notes 529

C. Marijuana Legalization and the Drug Treaties 531

_Cannabis Regulation and UN Drug Treaties: Strategies for Reform_,
David Bewley-Taylor, Martin Jelsma,

Notes 542

D. Issues and Challenges in Marijuana Regulation 544
1. Taxing Marijuana 544

_Marijuana Taxes—Present and Future Traps_, Pat Oglesby,
83 Tax Notes 391 (2017) 544

Notes 552
2. Regulating Edible Marijuana Products 554

_“High” Standards: The Wave of Marijuana Legalization Sweeping America Conveniently Ignores the Hidden Risks_,
Steve Calandrillo & Katelyn J. Fulton, 80 Ohio St. L.J. 201 (2019) 555

Notes 561
3. Marijuana Lounges 561

_The Elephant in Nevada’s Hotel Rooms: Social Consumption of Recreational Marijuana, a Survey of Law, Issues, and Solutions_,

Notes 568
4. Local Control 569

_Marijuana Localism_, Robert A. Mikos,
65 Case W. Res. L. Rev. 719 (2015) 569

Notes 572
5. Expunging Past Convictions 573

_Leveraging Marijuana Reform to Enhance Expungement Practices_,

Notes 579
6. Equity and the Legal Marijuana Industry 580

_The Colors of Cannabis: Race and Marijuana_,
Steven W. Bender, 50 U.C. Davis L. Rev. 689 (2016) 580
CONTENTS


E. Effects of Legalization on Policing 590
People v. McKnight, 446 P.3d 397 (Colo. 2019) 591
Notes 601

Chapter 7 • The Conflict between State Legalization and Federal Prohibition 605
A. Marijuana Scheduling under the Federal Controlled Substances Act 605
In the Matter of Marijuana Rescheduling Petition, September 6, 1988 608
Marijuana Scheduling Petition; Denial of Petition, Drug Enforcement Administration, 54 F.R. 53767 December 29, 1989 618
Alliance for Cannabis Therapeutics v. Drug Enforcement Administration, 930 F.2d 936 (D.C. Cir. 1991) 629
Notes 633

B. Federal Prosecutions of State-Legal Marijuana Operations 637
1. Federal Enforcement Resources and the DOJ’s Enforcement Guidelines 637
Memorandum for All United States Attorneys: Guidance Regarding Marijuana Enforcement, James M. Cole, Deputy Attorney General, August 29, 2013 640
Notes 642
2. Budget Rider 644
United States v. McIntosh, 833 F.3d 1163 (9th Cir. 2016) 645
Notes 652

C. Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) Lawsuits 654
Safe Streets Alliance v. Hickenlooper, 859 F.3d 865 (10th Cir. 2017) 655

D. Preemption 664
Ter Beek v. City of Wyoming, 495 Mich. 1 (2014) 665
Notes 673
People v. Crouse, 388 P.3d 39 (Colo. 2017) 676
Notes 681

E. Section 280E Tax Penalty 681
Olive v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue,
792 F.3d 1146 (9th Cir. 2015) 683

Tax Planning for Marijuana Dealers,
Notes and Questions 689

F. Access to Banking Services 690

Banks, Marijuana, and Federalism, Julie Anderson Hill,
65 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 597 (2015) 691

Memorandum for All United States Attorneys: Guidance Regarding Marijuana Related Financial Crimes,
James M. Cole, Deputy Attorney General, February 14, 2014 694

Guidance: BSA Expectations Regarding Marijuana-Related Businesses, Department of the Treasury, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, February 14, 2014 697

Fourth Corner Credit Union v. Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 154 F. Supp. 3d 1185 (D. Colo. 2016) 704

G. Marijuana and Bankruptcy

In re Johnson, 532 B.R. 53 (W.D. Mich. 2015) 708
Notes 713

H. Enforceability of Marijuana Contracts 714

Green Earth Wellness Center v. Atain Specialty Insurance Company, 163 F. Supp. 3d 821 (D. Colo. 2016) 716
Notes 724

I. Intellectual Property 725

1. Trademarks 725

In re JuJu Joints, 120 U.S.P.Q.2d 1568 (2016) 725

Trademark Laundering, Useless Patents, and Other IP Challenges for the Marijuana Industry, Sam Kamin and Viva R. Moffat, 73 WASH. & LEE L. REV. 217 (2016) 729

Notes 739

2. Patents 741

**Table of Cases**

*Principal cases are listed in bold.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alleyne v. United States</td>
<td>281-283, 286, 287, 340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance for Cannabis Therapeutics v. Drug Enforcement Administration</td>
<td>610, 618, 629, 633, 635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anaya, United States v.</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelos, United States v.</td>
<td>356, 357, 367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprendi v. New Jersey</td>
<td>282, 287, 337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona v. Jones</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona v. Okun</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbuto v. Advantage Sales and Marketing, LLC</td>
<td>469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balint, United States v.</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobadilla-Pagán, United States v.</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonjour, Iowa v.</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booker, United States v.</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bourgoin v. Twin Rivers Papers Company, LLC</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breese v. Smith</td>
<td>103, 104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckeye Check Cashng, Inc. v. Cardegna</td>
<td>724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caballes, Illinois v.</td>
<td>593-595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caldwell, United States v.</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Californians Helping to Alleviate Medical Problems, Inc. v. Commissioner</td>
<td>685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carranza, United States v.</td>
<td>282, 284-287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childers, North Carolina v.</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Garden Grove v. Superior Court</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coe, State v.</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coats v. Dish Network, LLC</td>
<td>466, 473, 600, 678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conant v. Walters</td>
<td>166, 431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covarrubias, California v.</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crouse, People v.</td>
<td>601, 675, 676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daggett v. Sternick</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayi, United States v.</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dobson v. McClennan</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dossie, United States v.</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmondson v. Commissioner</td>
<td>682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erickson, Alaska v.</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans v. State</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Name</td>
<td>Page Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eves, United States v.</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex parte Yung Jon</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feinberg v. Commissioner</td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida Bar v. Christensen</td>
<td>755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Corner Credit Union v. Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fries, State v.</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuller, United States v.</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gall v. United States</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garvin v. Cook Investments NW</td>
<td>714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilmore, United States v.</td>
<td>653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gonzales v. Raich</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Earth Wellness Center v. Atain Specialty Insurance Company</td>
<td>716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grinspoon v. Drug Enforcement Administration</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Griswold v. Connecticut</td>
<td>103, 161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmelin v. Michigan</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris, Arizona ex. Rel. Montgomery v.</td>
<td>320, 321, 328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris, Florida v.</td>
<td>591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii v. Hogue</td>
<td>213, 214, 219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaberle v. Lowden</td>
<td>715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headspace International LLC v. Podworks Corp.</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heredia, United States v.</td>
<td>287, 288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hogue, State v.</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holland, United States v.</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holsted, Kansas v.</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoseman, State v.</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostetter v. Idlewild Bon Voyage Liquor Corp.</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutto v. Davis</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In re CWNevada LLC</td>
<td>713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In re Johnson</td>
<td>708, 713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In re JuJu Joints</td>
<td>725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.D.W., Utah v.</td>
<td>390, 391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson, Commonwealth v.</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson, United States v.</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewell, United States v.</td>
<td>288–293, 295–298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones, State v.</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kama, Oregon v.</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemmish, Arizona v.</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiffer, United States v.</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleinman, United States v.</td>
<td>652, 653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kummer, State v.</td>
<td>391, 393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laird, People v.</td>
<td>579, 580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landry, Unites States v.</td>
<td>209, 724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linder v. United States v.</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liparota v. United States</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case/Courts</td>
<td>Citations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lopez, United States v.</td>
<td>177, 181, 638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynch, United States v.</td>
<td>653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maestas, Arizona v.</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maiden, United States v.</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallory, United States v.</td>
<td>771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin, State v.</td>
<td>231, 247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland v. Pringle</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maupin, State v.</td>
<td>307, 308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFadden, United States v.</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh, United States v.</td>
<td>645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLeod, Missouri v.</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKee, Ohio v.</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKnight, People v.</td>
<td>590, 591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moncrieffe v. Holder</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrison, United States v.</td>
<td>181, 638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murphy v. National Collegiate Athletic Association</td>
<td>675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws v. Bell</td>
<td>637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann</td>
<td>171, 181, 182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noffsinger v. SSC Niantic Operating Co., LLC</td>
<td>476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakland Cannabis Buyers’ Cooperative, United States v.</td>
<td>172, 173, 182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obergefell v. Hodges</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue</td>
<td>683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon v. Kama</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palomo Farms, LLC v. DEA</td>
<td>778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor, United States v.</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peck, California v.</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prado v. Barr</td>
<td>386, 580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printz v. United States</td>
<td>438, 491, 665, 674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ravin v. Alaska</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed, State v.</td>
<td>215, 218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed-Kaliher v. Hoggatt</td>
<td>19, 482, 488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regan, Wyoming v.</td>
<td>225, 226, 270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson, United States v.</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roach, State v.</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roche, State v.</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemond, United States v.</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell, United States v.</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Streets Alliance v. Hickenlooper</td>
<td>655, 673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schalk v. Indiana</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherwood Associates LP v. Jackson</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrestha, United States v.</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solem v. Helm</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy, United States v.</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley v. Georgia</td>
<td>104, 107, 161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Staples v. United States, 285, 304
Swiderski, United States v., 254, 263
Tracy v. USAA Casualty Insurance, 714
Ter Beek v. City of Wyoming, 492, 665
Thomas, State v., 234
Trevino, United States v., 654
United States Gypsum Co., United States v., 285, 286, 397
Washington v. Barr, 636
Whalen v. Roe, 181, 435
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It is difficult to overstate the impact of, or the controversy surrounding, the so-called “war on drugs” on modern American criminal justice systems over the past half-century. The criminalization of marijuana and its enforcement have arguably been the most impactful and controversial of any modern drug prohibitions. And long-standing controversies and concerns over marijuana prohibition have, in recent years, morphed into a remarkable array of fast-moving legal and policy reforms: over the last quarter-century since California first legalized medical marijuana, and especially in the last decade as numerous jurisdiction have legalized recreational marijuana, marijuana policy and practice has become the most dynamic of legal reform stories in all of American law.

Marijuana criminalization has long had dramatic impacts on constitutional criminal law and procedure, and every actor in the criminal justice system has long had to confront the social and racial consequences of (spotty) enforcement of criminal prohibitions surrounding this widely used drug. Modern new laws authorizing medical and recreational use of marijuana have now required an array of public health and regulatory actors to address an array of novel legal and social issues, while the wisdom and morality of any forms of marijuana prohibition remain hotly contested. But the value of understanding and teaching modern marijuana law extends beyond the policymakers and lawyers who might be interested in working directly in criminal justice and public health fields.

General Pedagogical Value and Specific Value to Students

Teaching marijuana law and policy has broad pedagogical value as a way of introducing students to broader societal issues and their intersection with the justice system and the modern administrative state. The early chapters of this text particularly highlight the history and impact of drug prohibitions and regulations while also encouraging students to reflect on what makes marijuana a distinctive drug that may (or may not) justify distinctive treatment legally and practically. Marijuana law and policy also provides an important opportunity to address and explore race and poverty issues in the classroom to show how legal doctrine and individual outcomes of criminal justice encounters are often shaped by these factors.

The area of marijuana law and policy is incredibly complex, continuously evolving, and always the subject of attention in the press and popular culture. Consequently, this field provides students an opportunity to follow dynamic legal reforms
in real-time while also engaging in sophisticated analysis and thinking with respect to a myriad of doctrinal fields, including business law, employment law, health law, intellectual property law, criminal law, constitutional law, sentencing policy, and others. Marijuana law and policy allows students to revisit concepts and questions covered in their first-year core courses and address them in holistic fashion. Because of the complexity and the number of legal doctrines it touches, marijuana law and policy lends itself well to a capstone course design, giving students an opportunity to apply what they have learned throughout their legal education.

The marijuana and broader drug field presents an ever-evolving legal environment where federal, state and local laws and regulations are not always in agreement. Excitement is common among students when taking their marijuana law course, in part because of how changing laws bring new light to classic legal issues. By grappling with new legal questions related to the emerging marijuana industry or new approaches to law enforcement, students are able to better understand the intersection of complex legal doctrines that can seem abstract or opaque.

The law school curriculum is filled with abstract concepts that can be hard to grasp without practical application. Course materials that seem removed from the practice of law lead some students to feel a gap between education received in a classroom and real-world applications. The area of marijuana law, as well as related drug law and policy aspects, provides a bridge between law school teachings and the practice of law by presenting practical and understandable application for complex legal questions. Students often feel familiar with the marijuana industry and the legal questions facing the field, which in turn makes it easier to apply what they have learned in the classroom to these problems.

The ultimate goal of nearly all law students is to secure a job upon graduation. And while grades are important, academic achievement should be accompanied by networking with professionals in the area of law students want to enter. Because of the novelty of the marijuana industry, and because of drug law’s complex regulatory structure, courses in this space foster a setting to host a number of legal and government professionals to discuss a specific aspect of the industry or regulatory environment. This gives students an excellent opportunity to engage with professionals and grow their networks.

The marijuana industry is growing at an incredible rate, with more and more states (as well as nations throughout the world) creating medical and adult-use marijuana programs. Because of the relative novelty of this industry and its complicated regulatory environment, students who are familiar with various marijuana laws have special career opportunities in a dynamic and interesting field. Additionally, because of the newness of this area, recent graduates may have special advancement opportunities in law firms that are short on people familiar with this industry.

Students often seek to make a difference in the communities around them and the area of drug law and policy offers great opportunities. Policy debates are robust and enduring for marijuana law in particular and drug law generally, offering numerous
ways for students to be active participants in impactful policy advocacy. As states grapple with how to best regulate an emerging industry and how to address past harms of the war on drugs, students can be directly involved in seeking to change existing policies to achieve a more equitable and less harmful system for all.

Drug law and policy courses, and especially marijuana law courses, offer law schools a great opportunity to engage alumni by bringing them back to campus as guest speakers or for events in this area (including Continuing Legal Education courses). Because law is an evolving field of study, law schools strive to keep their curriculum current. With respect to legal marijuana businesses, marijuana law is a new area of practice, yet clearly one that is growing, and law schools should consider incorporating cannabis law into their curriculum to maintain up-to-date course offerings. (In addition, given the specialized nature of marijuana law, it is an area that is well-suited for being taught by adjunct professors.)

Chapter Overviews

This book provides an overview of the law and policy of marijuana prohibition and reform. Chapter 1 introduces the drug marijuana and its use and offers a range of perspectives on what other substances are comparable for legal and regulatory purposes. Chapter 2 introduces some of the key policy questions related to drug prohibition in the United States. Chapter 3 moves from policy to legal history and modern doctrines that have developed in light of a long history of prohibition and modern reforms. Chapter 4 addresses doctrines surrounding, and issues presented by, marijuana’s criminalization. Chapter 5 explores the legal, policy, and practice issues raised by medical marijuana reforms in states. Chapter 6 turns to the legal, policy, and practice issues raised by recreational marijuana reforms in states. And Chapter 7 focuses on the myriad issues resulting from the conflict between federal and state marijuana laws.